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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

A Cover-Up in Rome?

The Italian authorities have finally announced the Bulgarian plot to kill the pope will have its day in court in early April. But a rumor is out that the fix is in. Sergei Antonov, the Bulgarian "airline employee," will plead guilty to a lesser offense, charges will be dropped against two other Bulgarian spies who fled home after the 1981 shooting, and the trial will end. Italy will join everyone else in returning to detente with Bulgaria's Soviet puppet-masters.

The judicial rumor mill in Rome says the idea is that Antonov will admit he helped Mehmet Ali Agca transport drugs from Bulgaria to Italy—but that he'll claim he had no idea Agca was going to do a thing like try to kill John Paul II. Claire Sterling, the Rome-based journalist and terror expert, says the Italian judiciary is scared to death the politicians will insist on such a cover-up. Antonov would then be sentenced to the couple of years he's already been held, and returned to Sofia.

Bulgaria does indeed run drugs, so there is first-glance plausibility to the tale. After all, Agca was initially recruited for smuggling. But even the most carefully woven disinformation yarn unravels at a second glance.

This fall's 1,200-page report by Judge Ilario Martella carefully documents how Bulgaria recruited Agca as a hit man, how its three Rome-based spooks briefed him for several weeks, then drove him to St. Peter's Square and arranged the planned escape in a customs-free truck waiting at the Bulgarian Embassy. Further, it's unlikely that Antonov and the other Bulgarians ever got involved in drug dealing. Both the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and evidence from a huge drug trial in Trent, Italy, indicate the Bulgarians never use their own officials for that.

There are obvious political pressures on Italy to go along. The Bulgarian ambassador to Italy recently met with a group of journalists in Rome. He reportedly made the observation that the arms talks at Geneva showed a U.S. preference for detente over tracking down Communist breaches. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko is coming to Rome next month, promising new commercial deals.

The prosecutor and judge in the case need the cooperation of the political authorities. In the first Agca trial, the politicians demanded the prosecutor press the lone-deranged-Moslem-fanatic explanation for Agca. Judge Severino Santiapichi, who will also sit on the April trial, said no way. In his Statement of Motivation explaining Agca's life sentence, the judge said Agca had "merely been used as a pawn," hinting that some foreign group was involved. He said the investigation hadn't "pierced the thick curtain of silence covering this affair." The real story came to light only after the Italians unleashed their secret service to gather evidence. The worry now is that the further links between the Bulgarians and the KGB won't be pursued.

The Italian government has done well so far by hanging tough. The Bulgarians arrested two Italian tourists in 1982 on trumped-up spying charges, and tried to get them traded for Antonov. This didn't work, and both have now been freed. Pravda continues to huff and puff, but few Italians read it and none believe it.

But the Italians are tired of going solo in getting to the bottom—or, rather, top—of this plot. They can be forgiven. What would be unforgivable is if Washington fails to end its curious silence over this affair before it's too late.